DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 347 690 EA 024 141

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TITLE The Effect of the Accelerated Schools Process on Individual Teachers' Decision-Making and Instructional Strategies.
PUB DATE Apr 92
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 20-24, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acceleration (Education); Collegiality; Elementary Education; Faculty Development; High Risk Students; *Instructional Improvement; Learning Processes; *Participative Decision Making; *Program Effectiveness; *Teacher Improvement
IDENTIFIERS *Accelerated Schools

ABSTRACT

A study examined the influence of participation in the Accelerated Schools Project on teachers' instructional behaviors, with a focus on teachers' instructional decision-making and their implementation of inquiry processes. The Accelerated Schools Project was designed to integrate high-risk students into the educational mainstream by the end of elementary school, and was based on the concepts of school-based management, teacher empowerment, and collaborative inquiry. The project was evaluated through interviews conducted with teachers and administrators in two accelerated elementary schools that participated in the acceleration process for at least 2 years, classroom observations, and document analysis. Findings suggest that teachers achieved a spirit of empowerment; engaged in cooperative instructional planning; and provided enriched, active learning experiences. (28 references) (LMI)

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The Effect of the Accelerated Schools Process on Individual Teachers' Decision-Making and Instructional Strategies

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association

San Francisco, CA

April 22, 1992

Introduction

This paper will look at the effects of participation in the Accelerated Schools Process on the decisions made by individual classroom teachers during the course of the instructional day in terms of their own problem-solving and lesson planning and the inclusion of problem-solving, inquiry-oriented techniques with their classroom strategies.

EA 024 141

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The Accelerated Schools Process

The Accelerated Schools Project is a comprehensive approach to school change designed to improve schooling for students in at-risk situations so that they enter the educational mainstream by the end of elementary school (Levin, 1986, 1987, 1988 and Hopfenberg, Levin, Meister, & Rogers, 1990). At-risk students presently account for approximately one-third of all elementary and secondary students in the nation, and the number is rising (Pallas, et al, 1989.) At present, there are more than 150 schools nationwide which are engaging in the process of acceleration by making institutional changes which emphasize high expectations, unity of purpose, decision-making roles for each member of the school community, and an approach to teaching and learning which is usually reserved for gifted and talented students - the use of enriched and accelerated curriculum and instruction. A process of collaborative inquiry is utilized to identify challenge areas and move the individual school toward its own unique solutions. It is expected that it will take a period of approximately six years for a full transformation of a traditional school into an Accelerated School.

Despite recent calls for site-based management and teacher empowerment, most public schools in the United States today still operate under the factory-style principal-teacher relationship which existed in schools fifty years ago. The Accelerated Schools Project is based on the premise that these old relationships are no longer

appropriate for the expanded task of the American school - that of bringing all students , and in particular, students in at-risk situations, into the educational mainstream by a process of acceleration rather than remediation. Accelerated Schools strive to develop the capacity at the local school site for teacher empowerment and decision-making. This notion of empowerment, coupled with responsibility, rests on a solid research base on the relation of worker participation in decision-making and productivity in business and industry as well as on recent research in teacher empowerment and professionalization. (See Levin, 1990, Maeroff, 1988, Sirotnik, 1988, and Goodlad, 1984.) Accelerated Schools strive to build on the strengths of all members of the school community by involving them in collaborative leadership and decision-making which will lead the school to its agreed-upon vision.

Establishing a solid theoretical framework for such an organizational restructuring is a necessary but not sufficient condition for success. This new model of organization necessitates new ways of doing things in schools and creates an initial period of tremendous role ambiguity and conflict. The empowerment of teachers creates conflicting expectations for behavior. Teachers are suddenly thrust from the relative isolation of their classrooms to the larger world of the school. There is much confusion about what decisions they can and should make. There is also great anxiety on their part about their ability to make them. The entire culture of the school is undergoing a redefinition and without this redefinition the process of change will fail. With it, however, comes a period of turmoil and

uncertainty as people in schools work through the newness and expansion of their roles and responsibilities. (Clift, et al, 1990.)

This paper will look at some of the influences of participation in the Accelerated Schools Project on the instructional behaviors of classroom teachers. In particular, teacher instructional decision-making and planning and the implementation of inquiry processes in the classroom will be examined.

Collaborative Change

The Accelerated School Project relies on the collaborative efforts of all members of the school community to effect change. While instances of collaborative projects are not difficult to find, few are as all-encompassing as the one employed in the Accelerated Schools Project (McCarthy, 1991). The results of many of these collaborative projects have not been encouraging. In may cases, collaborative efforts have suffered from a lack of specificity - the structural and support mechanisms to facilitate change and collaboration have not been built into programs, so things quickly resort back to the "status quo". In other instances, the change is superficial and does not bring about the "rich, professional dialogue" which Goodlad (1984) says is crucial to collaboration.

The literature is clear in pointing out that change does not occur in a top-down model of implementation. Those people who are the major players must be empowered to make meaningful decisions regarding

the changes taking place (McCarthy, 1991). It is also clear that universities and colleges of education have much to learn from teachers and other members of local school communities. It is the view of the Accelerated Schools Project that collaboration with a shared vision of what schools should be seems to hold promise for deep, meaningful change in both school and university cultures.

Staff Development

The recent literature on staff development seems to indicate that many professional development activities are dismal failures. Teacher behavior at the end of such training activities remains unchanged from the teacher behavior in place before the training. Many reasons for this failure have been posited. (For a succinct summary of the research, see Fullan, 1992, pp. 315-344.) In general, staff development activities which were not linked to the total school program and other changes in curriculum, instruction, and organization, were not successful. Efforts which were not supported or facilitated with resources, follow-up, guided practice, changes in organization to allow for time to plan, technical assistance, a conceptual framework, and a reward system for implementing the change were not successful (Fullan, 1992).

Many studies have found that it is very difficult to alter long-held beliefs and practices and that many staff development programs and restructuring efforts are simply added on to the existing infrastructure and the business of the school goes on in much the

same way that it has for the past century. (Wehlage, Smith, & Lipman, 1992; Cuban, 1988; Lieberman & Miller, 1990; McLaughlin, 1990; Richardson, 1990; and Guskey, 1988.)

Accelerated Schools and School Restructuring

The Accelerated Schools Project considered the research literature in the areas of collaboration, school change, and staff development in the design of the Accelerated Schools Process and the training and staff development activities which are used to initiate and maintain the process in individual schools. The process may be conceived of as having three stages (Levin, 1988, b&c). The first stage is the **decision processes stage.** This is the initial stage of intervention and is a time for capacity building and restructuring for school-site decision-making. Time is required in order to build capacity for school communities to learn to make decisions together and design innovations.

The Accelerated Schools Project, with a strong belief that change will only occur in school communities when it is a bottom-up endeavor, designed the following process for capacity-building:
(1) Members of the school community define and describe the present conditions at the school - a period of taking stock. (2) The entire school community works together to establish a vision for the school in which they set forth their specific long-term goals. (3) The entire school community will identify areas where the present conditions do not meet the expectations set forth in the vision. The

school community then agrees upon initial priorities for action. (4) A governance system is established to facilitate the inquiry into priority areas and a complete understanding of problems before addressing solutions. This structure consists of task forces or cadres which will each be responsible for addressing a priority area; a steering committee composed of members of task forces, administration, parents, and students; and the school-as-a-whole. (5) Finally, task forces engage in a collaborative inquiry process in which they a) attempt to understand the nature of their challenge area; b) search for possible solutions inside and outside the school; c) synthesize solutions; d) pilot test selected solutions; and e) evaluate the effectiveness of these solutions (McCarthy, Hopfenberg, & Levin, 1991; Levin, 1988 c).

The next stage is that of **implementation**. This is when the school establishes new programs or practices or replaces existing programs based on the collaborative decisions made during the first three stages of the inquiry process. The implementation includes pilot testing, evaluating, and re-assessing as part of good implementation practice.

The process of staff empowerment and the attention to collaborative problem solving which occur during this stage may change the behaviors of individual teachers and administrators in their daily activities and decisions. Teachers and administrators may thoughtfully make changes in their own practices to support the overall goals of the school. Participation in collaborative decision-

making and the resulting empowerment may change individual behavior outside of collaborative efforts. This paper will look at some of those changes.

Stage three of the process is **student outcomes.** It is expected that the final outcome of an accelerated school would be improvement in student achievement along many measures, improved attendance, self-esteem, behavior, and satisfaction with school. We would expect to find increased parental involvement and participation and increased staff work satisfaction and participation. In this stage, data are gathered which are compared to baseline data collected at the beginning of the process (McCarthy, Hopfenberg, & Levin, 1991; Levin, 1988 c).

The implementation of this three stage process is designed to create radical and meaningful change in schools which is sustained by the members of the school community. Initial indications are that the process is working. In addition to looking at whether the project was accomplishing the intended purposes, it was decided to look at the unintended consequences for teachers of their participation in the project. If the change was meaningful, their personal and professional lives would be impacted as they internalized new beliefs and practices.

Methodology

Data for this study were gathered by means of semi-structured and unstructured interviews over a period of two years with teachers and administrators in two accelerated elementary schools which had been engaged in the process of acceleration for two or more years. These interviews were supplemented with classroom observations in both schools. Field notes were taken during site visits by the Stanford researcher. School documents such as the campus plan and minutes of task force meetings were also examined.

Results

Analysis of the data reveals that teacher behaviors have changed in the classroom as the result of the influence of participation in the Accelerated Schools Project. Interviews with teachers indicated a spirit of empowerment in school decision making processes which extended into the classroom. As one teacher commented, "The most important thing about an accelerated school is the empowerment. Once you get the teachers used to being able to make their own decisions, school will almost inevitably improve. Teachers are so much more aware of what is happening in their classrooms and what their kids can do and how they learn. So once they have that empowerment to make decisions about their teaching, that starts the program off." An administrator in the same school stated, "Our teachers have the freedom to teach what they like, when they like... and we get results."

Another result of the accelerated schools process has been cooperative planning for instruction among teachers. Many had never seen each other teach before. The new collaborative environment in the schools seemed to have opened the doors for cooperation and collaboration among individual teachers as they planned for instruction. There are instances of team teaching and thematic learning which takes place with several teachers working together in schools where such activities never occurred before participation in the project. In the words of one teacher, "Our teachers now learn from other teachers. There is a great deal of visiting in classrooms, both formal and informal discussion among teachers."

Once teachers become empowered to make decisions in the classroom, they find that teaching becomes a rewarding experience. One teacher stated, "Our becoming an accelerated school has made teaching exciting. It makes teaching seem really worthwhile. It's definitely something to experience as a teacher." Another teacher states, "We operate our school on the philosophy, 'If it works, do it!' When you get your set of kids, find out what they need and go for it. Some of our classes have made ice cream. Some of our classes have made pies. Through active learning, our kids are learning math, reading, logical thinking, and social skills much more effectively than through paper exercises."

Another teacher describes a unique program the teachers created to enrich the experiential backgrounds of their students. "Our Fabulous Friday Program focuses on rather unconventional subjects, but every one of them has some academic or social component that fits into the state's guidelines. For instance, every subject has its vocabulary and other mandated components. It is possible to be really creative, to give your students what can really help them, and still fulfill the state requirements."

Fabulous Friday was a result of the Curriculum Task Force utilization of the Inquiry Process to find ways to provide experiences, ideas, and materials for the students that were readily available to middle class kids. So under the theme of "building bridges to the middle class," the team decided to provide many of these experiences and situations for their students by means of four-week mini-courses which would take place every Friday afternoon. The Friday Faculty includes almost every adult in the building and "guest teachers" such as retired teachers, central office staff, and community volunteers. Some of the classes include beginning swimming, bowling, Scuba diving, the history of rug making, young artists, babysitting, secret codes and spy stories, the Last Days of Pompeii, eating around the world, and woodshop. The Marketing Task Force helped to find the resources for the program.

While Fabulous Fridays were a formal program of the Curriculum Task Force, the teachers in the school began to utilize the principles and concepts of the program in their everyday classroom instruction.

As one teacher stated, "Fabulous Friday showed me that I could plan learning activities for my students that were relevant, interesting, and hands-on and yet be academically focussed. I have turned around the way I run my classroom and the children are really starting to grow socially and academically."

At one school, a number of teachers decided to move with their students through the grade levels. This teacher-initiated flexible scheduling and grouping was a radical departure from the way things had traditionally been done in the school. One teacher explained how it all came about. "Two third grade teachers, two fourth grade teachers, and two fifth grade teachers have joined together to form a giant team. We'll still be part of our various grade level teams, but we'll also form a big block in which we'll try to cross-group and do things within those six teachers, six classes. And what we've done is...I'm moving up with my class, the fourth grade teachers are moving up with their classes, and the fifth grade teachers, whose kids are going on to middle school, are moving down to teach third grade. So, we'll be with these kids for three years.

Classroom observations indicate enriched active learning experiences occurring in the classrooms of accelerated schools. Teachers are utilizing discovery learning and the inquiry process in the classroom. In one room, a teacher had a trunk filled with artifacts from a culture that the fourth graders had not yet studied. She was holding up articles of clothing, artwork, and utensils and was having them hypothesize about the kind of people who might utilize such items.

They were trying to describe the culture from the items found in the trunk. In a post-instruction interview, the teacher stated that she had always been a very traditional teacher who had engaged in direct instruction and made extensive use of drill and practice. The Accelerated Schools Project had opened her mind up to new ways of teaching and learning. She felt empowered to try new things that she thought might have the potential to work with her own students. In the past, if a student wasn't learning, she would have felt badly and perhaps tried some remediation. She now uses a problem-solving approach to analyze exactly what the problem is and to hypothesize about potentially effective solutions-the process the school uses to make decisions.

The interview and observation data are rich with stories like these. As one principal stated, "The Accelerated Schools Process seems to help teachers find the best in themselves. They become empowered learners who explore problems and become experts. Teachers who had been afraid to take risks are finding something that turns them on in the classroom and they are running with it. They now have a process for identifying and solving problems and they use it not only on the school level but in their classrooms as well. There has been a real shift in power structure here."

Summary

The process developed by the Accelerated Schools Project seems to have the potential to make lasting and meaningful changes in the culture of the school, unlike other quick-fix solutions which are not internalized by the participants. Further qualitative and quantitative research will be done to explore the extent to which change has become internalized and meaningful restructuring has occurred.

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